

Reflections

Saturday, September 5, 2020

Hurricane Laura, Lake Charles, LA

Follow-up from participant, Jim Serra

Thanks for the note Scott. I really am excited about what Monroe is doing. I promise I will get one of those virtual courses in. Thought I'd share this with you. It may give you a little bit of insight at least into my impressions of Laura.

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I drove around town yesterday and saw the process of clearing debris well ahead of what had been achieved a week after Hurricane Rita in 2005. The general analysis is that damage exceeds Rita overall but that post-storm response is occurring at a faster clip. Clearly the prevailing thinking is that with vastly more homes prepared with emergency generators and so many locals veterans of previous hurricanes, officials felt comfortable allowing residents access to their homes and businesses far earlier than they did after Rita. I've heard of no one "abusing" that privilege by driving through wires and further knocking down utility poles, etc.

This is always the hardest and most heart-wrenching part. But I don't know anyone more proficient at responding to a catastrophic event than Southwest Louisianans and Southeast Texans. The same wildly independent, borderline anarchical traits that sometimes cause eye rolls among those like me who place a premium on shared civic goals really do pay off at times like this. Hurricane Rita immediately slipped into invisible status nationally, and Laura has done the same. Most folks around here (me included, this time around) shrug and go on about their business clearing out, cleaning up, helping each other, and moving on to a new normal.

A few random thoughts:

As is always the case, this hurricane has and will continue to hit poor folks hardest. Greater Lake Charles (typical of coastal Louisiana) is a study in haves and have-nots. Poor folks tend to live in small wood frame homes or shanties with substandard roofs, closely surrounded by large trees, many of those dead or dying. A perfect storm when a big storm comes to visit. After Hurricane Rita attention was given to hardened and improved low-cost housing. If we are to sustain our economy, the commitment will have to accelerate so those paycheck-to-paycheck people without significant means can continue to live here. As the Coronavirus has taught us, we as a community lose them at our own peril. As bad as the storm was, and as frightful as the devastation looks in moneyed neighborhoods, wealthy (or comparably wealthy) residents carry insurance and will rebuild as necessary and go on about their lives. Those below their means don't have that luxury. They must do whatever it takes to survive, even if that means moving elsewhere.

Stuff can always be replaced. Lives can't. You just can't say that enough.

The Hurricane Laura damage zone has an opportunity to rebuild in ways large and small into a much more hurricane-resistant (and yes, beautiful & livable) community. The process began after Rita but there still was the prevailing idea that it was a one-off. Laura has effectively convinced folks that major hurricanes are something we need to anticipate happening over and over again, and it's up to us to do what we can to prepare for it.

When Governor Edwards said we dodged a bullet, he took some heat. He shouldn't have. We were incredibly lucky not to take the storm surge in populated areas that was predicted based on solid evidence. That would have made the aftermath we're seeing now look like child's play. One of the greatest things about Rita was level of new construction in Lake Charles that was raised pier and beam or at least concrete slabs built on dirt-raised elevations. That's how buildings here USED to be built (I'm biased; we live in one). It's time to recapture that wisdom more broadly. That's two storms where flooding was predicted throughout metro Lake Charles and it didn't happen. But that's not to say that it won't happen at some point. Now is the time to get ready for it by making repairs, renovations or new construction more resistant to high winds and flooding.

An immense amount of the damage I saw during my tour yesterday involved, no surprise, trees fallen into houses. If you leave a water oak with its flat root ball within the fall zone of your house, it will crush your life. It's just a matter of when. The new reality is coastal communities like Lake Charles are exposed to increased hurricane damage by the large numbers of trees here. Rita and now Laura have taken care of many of them at great cost, but increased focus really does need to be put on what surrounds homes and businesses, and the probability they themselves are disasters waiting to happen.

As my structural engineer son-in-law points out, if you took roof damage in one part of your house and not in another, that doesn't mean you came out scot-free on the undamaged parts. There's a pretty good chance your roof has been weakened; shingles and nails loosened. If it is within your means, consider a whole new roof with straps and ice & water shield underneath before the next major hurricane hits.

As bad as the damage is, there are some very encouraging signs. Overall Downtown Lake Charles is eminently fixable, and remains beautiful, populated, and streetscaped. Yes, all that green glass in our tallest skyscraper will be replaced. Just a reminder that it was an uninhabited war zone after Rita. Not so this time beyond the dramatic news coverage of the green building and fallen TV tower. Similarly, as badly as Cameron Parish got hit, Holly Beach is still standing. It had been wiped off the face of the earth in Rita. Part of that is due to hardened, dramatically-raised structures built since the last hurricane. My humble opinion is that now we need to seriously consider allowing folks the option to build far cheaper and proven durable Asian tsunami style low-to-the-ground concrete, soluable material-free, homes in lower Cameron Parish.

Good riddance to the KPLC and KSWL self-supporting towers. I'm glad no one was hurt when they both came crashing down. Please don't call them "landmarks." They were never that. I've already expressed my opinion about bulldozing the Civic Center and allowing developers to come in and build the kind of lakefront amenities our city deserves. That won't happen with that albatross and its ridiculous sea of parking lots sitting there.

Southwest Louisiana has a history of reaching for easy-fix silver bullets to power its economy. After Hurricane Rita it was gas-related (mostly LNG terminals) and petrochemical plant construction. Where else would multibillion dollar casino resorts be considered economic afterthoughts? But that gravy train is ending, and Lake Charles must give more than well-meaning lip service to a diversified, knowledge based economy. The upshot is that in the wake of this hurricane we may have a reduced population as folks bail and find work elsewhere. That happened in Katrina, and eventually many of those folks returned home. Whether we create the kind of jobs or incentives for new small businesses that will allow "Laura refugees" to return someday remains to be seen.

The week after Laura, many of us have full water pressure. I think that's just miraculous and testament to the City of Lake Charles and Calcasieu Parish. If you don't have water yet, I hope you get it soon. There are utility line workers everywhere you look. The response to getting our region's electrical infrastructure back online is nothing short of astounding, with thousands of workers descended on the city. Whether they are hardening these plants to the degree south Florida has remains to be seen. I'm guessing not. We will largely be as exposed in the next hurricane as we were this time and in Rita. Economics may simply dictate that's the way it's going to be.

The same people who rail on social media against Mexicans and Central Americans taking our jobs WILL be grateful AF to those same temporary visitors for rebuilding their homes. Thank God for these tireless laborers and skilled crafts men and women, who are already working from before dawn till well after dusk. We couldn't have recovered from Rita without them and the same will be true with Laura. God bless every last one of these wonderful people. Bienvenido y gracias!

Lake Charles was a dramatically better city in the wake of Hurricane Rita. The same will be true with Laura. I predict the pace of these improvements will astound many who currently wonder if we'll ever get through this. We will. Never forget how resilient humans and nature are. Always invest on the dip.

More later. Dublin and I are back on the porch. That's the sun rising (cue music of your choice). I need a second cup and she is demanding to be fed.

